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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a synthesis of the literature reporting the experiences nationally of alternative schools, particularly in the realm of preventing school dropouts and reaching those who have already left school. Characteristics of alternative schools are described, including structure, reputation, and purposes. The dropout problem is discussed, including dropouts' dislike of school, indicators associated with potential dropouts, and potential dropouts' discipline problems. Characteristics of alternative schools are presented in detail. It is noted that: (1) most alternative schools are located away from the regular high schools; (2) alternative schools' programming attempts to foster academic and social comforts; (3) friendly relationships between students and teachers are stressed; and (4) experiential learning is emphasized. The effects of alternative schools on potential dropouts are discussed. These effects include success in retaining potential dropouts in school, reduction in truancy, accumulation of high school credits, and improved student attitudes and behavior. Elements of successful alternative schools are presented in these categories: size, choice, autonomy, and varied learning opportunites. The wide variance in these schools' costs is discussed. In conclusion, alternative school-based dropout programs are recommended for their probable success. A select bibliography with 46 entries is included. (ABL)

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A STUDY OF THE NATIONAL EXPERIENCE

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Prepared for Elmira, New York, Board of
Cooperative Educational Services

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DROPOUT PREVENTION THROUGH ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOLS
A STUDY OF THE NATIONAL EXPERIENCE

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The objective of this paper is to present a synthesis of the literature reporting the experiences nationally of alternative schools, particularly in the realm of preventing school dropouts and reaching those who have already left school. While this study surveyed alternative education in all settings, in order to draw broadly on the variety of programs which have been tried, this paper is framed in terms of the experiences that have the most applicability to moderate size city school districts.

Alternative schools frequently suffer from a bad press. Many citizens associate them with permissiveness, lax standards, and mistaken priorities. Products of the educational and social ferment of the 1960s, they are still viewed as havens for hippies and indexes of educational indiscipline. They have, however, matured and diversified remarkably in the last two decades, to the point that no single image or definition fits the range of options available under the alternative education umbrella. They have also turned in a remarkable track record for solid educational accomplishment (Raywid, 1985; Duke and Muzio, 1978; Smith, et al, 1981).

What, then, is alternative education in the 1980s? The term covers a broad range of educational configurations, from magnet schools to dropout prevention programs, from schools-without-walls to schools-within-a-school, from back-to-basics academies to the much-maligned free schools. While it is difficult to define alternative schools with any precision, they do all share some common characteristics. Raywid, in the most comprehensive survey of alternative schools made to date, found six elements that set alternative schools apart from conventional schools. They are:

> 1. The alternative constitutes a distinctive and identifiable administrative unit with its own personnel and program. Moreover, substantial effort is likely to be addressed to creating a strong sense of affiliation with the unit.
> 2. Structures and processes generative of school climate are held important and receive considerable attention within the unit.
> 3. Students as well as staff enter the alternative as a matter of choice rather than assignment.
> 4. The alternative is designed to respond to particular needs, desires, or interests not otherwise met in local schools, resulting in a program that is distinctively different from that of other schools in the area.
> 5. The impetus to launch the alternative, as well as its design, comes from one or more of the groups affected by the program: teachers, students, and parents.
> 6. Alternative schools generally address a broader range of student development than just the cognitive or academic. Typically, the sort of person the learner is becoming is a matter of first concern. (Raywid, 1984, p.71)

Of those, only the fifth does not always hold in dropout prevention and reentry programs. As will be clear later, the issues of institutional autonomy, school climate, choice,

responsiveness, and concern for affective and social development parallel to academic development, are central to the specific mission of successful dropout prevention programs. Because these programs have emerged most clearly within alternative education only within the last decade, this survey will focus primarily on recent developments. Suffice it here to say that the popular image of alternative education as unstructured free time fits very few alternative schools today, and virtually none of the program devoted to students at risk of leaving school prematurely.

The Dropout Problem

Nationwide, one out of every four young people of high school age will drop out of school before graduating. The social and economic consequences for the individual and the community are well known.

Indicators of Potential Dropouts

Dropouts tend to share a characteristic profile which allows educators to predict with fair accuracy which young people are most at risk of dropping out of school. That profile also, as we will see, provides alternative schools with their advantage in holding these students, or providing reentering students with a successful bridge to graduation. "Research indicates that students primarily leave school because they personally dislike their experience with school. They feel that they have been

'excluded' from the classroom via school and societal policies and practices and have developed a personal dislike accordingly." They drop out psychologically long before dropping out physically. At the secondary level, the indicators of potential dropouts include:

1. absenteeism, truancy, and frequent tardiness
2. poor grades, failure in one or more subjects or grade levels
3. low math and reading scores, usually 2 or more years behind
4. limited extracurricular participation, lack of identification with school, expressed feelings of not belonging.
5. poor social adjustment, perhaps socially or emotionally disturbed
6. low self-concept relative to authority figures
7. reluctance
8. lack of future orientation
9. inability to tolerate present school-structured activities, but wants structure
10. failure to see relevance of education to life experiences. (Morley and Clay, 1983, pp. 1-2)

Potential dropouts are also frequently discipline problems and disruptive in the classroom. Academic failure is the primary precursor, leading to both disruptive behavior and dropping out. As Griffin, Hoffman, and Hunter summarize the research, disruptive behavior "is quite often a counteraction to the student's perceived failure in the student role. . . . disruptive behavior is a defensive response to the threat to the adolescent's self-esteem." It serves such functions as acting as a counterattack on the threatening institution, eliciting the admiration of a peer audience, and declaring "rebellion against the standards of success set by the schools." Significantly, only 32% of dropouts are educationally handicapped, and 70% score above 90 on

IQ. Only 20% are forced out by dismissal. (Griffin, et al, 1984, p. 6) They are marginal students, with poor self-concepts in academics, uncertain support systems among peers and parents, weak basic skills "despite street savvy and quick minds," and uncertainty of purpose and direction in life. (Scott, 1985, p. 28; Cinal, 1982)

Alternatives to Dropping Out

Common sense suggests that no one system of schooling can successfully educate all learners, despite a century of effort to create the "one best system." (Tyack, 1974). An immense body of literature on the variability in learning styles and the priority of emotional needs for success in learning supports that observation. Arguably, a dropout rate of twenty-five percent is the nearly inevitable result of continuing to work within the confines of a single model of learning. It is precisely here that alternative schools commend themselves. Alternative education begins with the fact of differences, and capitalizes on them rather than penalizing them.

Location

Educators have created a wide variety of alternative schools designed to support at-risk youth. Most common seem to be schools in settings physically removed from the regular high school. These programs recognize that the regular school appears threatening or triggers negative reactions in alienated students.

They also seek a high degree of autonomy to develop their own atmosphere, structure, and ethos. Others are schools-within-a-school, using self-contained classrooms to provide the emotional support and structure needed by at-risk students.

In Troy, Albany, Buffalo, and New York City, a variety of separate-campus alternative schools have been devised. They feature low teacher/student ratios, but appear to be as concerned to remove disruptive students from regular classrooms as with the achievement of the potential dropouts (Trant, 1985 ; Lazzaro, 1985 ; Armlin, 1985 ; Foley and McConnaughy, 1982; Foley and Crull, 1984). Portland, Oregon, has both public dropout prevention alternatives and publicly supported private efforts. All emphasize moving the at-risk student back into the mainstream as quickly as possible (Moilanen, 1983; Yagi, 1983). Portland and Midvale, Utah, among others, offer night schools on regular high school campuses for reentry students (Moilanen, 1983; Cendese, 1979).

Norwich, New York; Aurora, Colorado; Sault Sainte Marie, Michigan; and numerous districts in Illinois and Iowa, all with more rural populations, developed programs in separate facilities. In Norwich, for instance, the decision to select a site away from the traditional school proved important, particularly in terms of establishing the alternative school's own tone, rules, methods of dealing with students, and so on. As the Norwich staff notes, "We were able to attract a significant number of drop-outs who would never have returned to the regular

school building." (Preuss, 1985; Rissler, 1980; Malmberg, 1983; Piland, 1982; Morley and Clay, 1983) On the other hand, Deer Park and Roslyn, New York, and other schools, created alternative programs in self-contained classrooms within the existing facilities. (Silverman, 1978; Scott, 1985)

Programming

Some alternative schools for potential dropouts are fully articulated alternatives to the conventional route to the diploma, allowing the student who opts for them to continue her entire program within the alternative school. Others are designed as bridges which lead back to the traditional classroom after providing counseling, drill in classroom skills, and remediation of basic skills. All seek student achievement, but some focus on altering behavior and attitude while others alter the setting and climate that contributed to the negative attitude and behavior. The common denominator seems to be an effort to foster academic and social comfort and security, to help the student identify with the school environment, and thereby to encourage a willingness to explore her potential, and to build confidence.

In the Deer Park district and elsewhere, the alternative program extends only through part of the school day; alternative school students spend two or more periods each day integrated into the regular classrooms. The Roslyn program removes marginal students from traditional classrooms and puts them in self-contained classrooms for the entire day, with content area

teachers rotated in. Class activities tend to be highly individualized, since the maximum ten students will include students from all four high school classes. This program attempts to return students to the mainstream as soon as possible (Silverman, 1978; Bock, 1978; Scott, 1985).

Further, some programs are explicitly aimed at vocational training, while others have a prominent career education and work/study component. All programs for potential dropouts stress affective learning in areas deemed essential to employment, such as punctuality, responsibility, conformity, and self-initiative, since lack of these skills contribute to the student's difficulties with school. But the more specifically vocationally-oriented programs offer career counseling and job skills as well. These programs appear to be located primarily in urban districts, and are quite costly compared to conventional schools or to alternative schools more concerned with academic success (Reynolds and Reeves, 1983;Lazzaro, 1985; Armlin, 1985; Malmberg, 1983).

While writers report successful intervention in programs that serve as bridges back into the mainstream as well as in those which are autonomous degree-granting institutions, no study has been located directly comparing the success of one program with the other. The impression one gains from the literature, however, is that the fully articulated alternative offers the greater opportunity for successfully graduating from high school. It meets student needs rather than engaging in short-term efforts to alter students' perceptions of self and school.

Classroom Relationships

Interestingly, the literature consistently indicates that one key to success with potential dropouts, and with dropouts reentering through alternative education, is in the quality of the relationships that can be created in an alternative school, and not in curricular change. Indeed, most programs follow a relatively traditional curriculum, although the methods of delivery are altered. But by changing the students' relationships with teachers, peers, and the institution, alternative schools are able to transform achievement levels, behavior patterns, and attitudes. Yagi's conclusions about three alternative schools in Portland, Oregon, apply to most alternative schools. Their most significant feature, he writes,

> is not so much the curriculum, but the special kind of relationship among staff members and especially with the disenchanted youths. Alternative school enrollees are largely those who respond only to frequent and immediate attention -- attention that is consistent in time and quality, attention that their homes or regular schools did not provide. Staff members provide this attention in and out of the classroom. They respond immediately and in ways characteristic of individuals who have very high expectations of their charges. Each member of each school has his/her own way of being firm, rewarding appropriate behavior, stimulating inquiry, motivating, helping, etc., with the common denominator being consistency in giving attention these students needed. The result is students each of whom is engaged in educationally worthwhile activities and behavior virtually at all times. (Yagi, 1983, p. 4).

By its nature, the conventional high school does not, and probably cannot, create the quality of relationship possible in an alternative school.

An interest in classroom climate over curriculum should not suggest, however, that classroom activity reflects the norms in conventional high schools, nor that classroom rigor is sacrificed for amiability. Alternative schools innovate broadly with learning strategies, and the classrooms are reported to be serious and productive.

Approaches to Teaching and Learning

Because alternative schools are usually very small, multi-age, multi-grade-level strategies are common, including peer tutoring. Individualized learning, competency based learning, and programmed learning occur often, particularly for drill in basic skills, and contract learning appears in several programs. Independent study is wide-spread among alternative schools, though it is less frequently found in dropout prevention programs than in others. Community service activities are favored in many schools. Extended field trips, including activities like Outward Bound, camping, and so forth, are more common in rural and smaller district programs. The primary curricular innovation is thematic and interdisciplinary instruction, favored both because of a more holistic approach to learning, and because of the limited staff.

The emphasis is generally on experiential learning. Internships, service programs in hospitals and nursing homes, tutoring and other activities that enhance observation, participation, and critical thinking are stressed, but classroom activities that enhance learning through experience are equally valued.

Effects of Alternative Schools on Potential Dropouts

The results obtained by the existing dropout prevention programs in alternative schools appears to be remarkably positive. Norwich, New York, reported dramatic change in behavior, substantial improvement academically, better attitudes toward self and others. After three years, Project Coffee, a rural dropout reentry program based in alternative schools, claimed that over 62 percent of its 136 dropout students had either earned a diploma or were still in the program, while another 14 percent had taken full-time jobs or joined the armed forces. All members of a comparison group remained out of school. An alternative high school in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, also serving reentering students, found achievement gains of over two grade levels in reading and mathematics after a year's work. Its dropout rate of over 46 percent is high, but in keeping with research findings that older dropouts are less successful in altering behavior patterns (the average age of the students at this school was 18.5 years) (Preuss, 1985; "Drawing in Dropouts," 1986; Malmberg, 1983).

Much the same results were found in urban alternative schools. Buffalo's Alternative Satellite Program, working with students with criminal records, realized a 77 to 82 percent yearly retention rate. Albany was successful in holding 84.5

percent of its at-risk students. Follow-up studies on students in one of Portland, Oregon's alternative schools, done twelve to eighteen months after they completed the program, reported seventy percent with satisfactory outcomes. Although students at Portland's alternatives had poor attendance records at their original schools, their average daily attendance at the alternatives runs 80 to 85 percent (Lazzaro, 1985; Trant, 1985; Yagi, 1983).

Students in one of New York City's alternative schools earned 60 percent more credits toward graduation in the alternative setting than in their school of origin, and reduced their rate of truancy by 40 percent. Among a population of students with a high probability of dropping out and students who had already dropped out, these schools held their dropout rate to 40 percent. Two vocationally-oriented alternative high schools in San Mateo County, California, claimed a ten percent increase in attendance over the average in the host schools, a significantly higher grade point average than a comparison group, and improved positive attitudes toward school, work, and self (Foley and McConnaughy, 1982; Foley and Crull, 1984; Reynolds and Reeves, 1983).

That last observation is important. Alternative school dropout prevention programs have resulted in remarkable changes in attitude and behavior beyond such quantifiable aspects as attendance and achievement. Indeed, transformation in self-concept, attitude, and commitment must precede improvement in

other areas. Thus it is significant when researchers find that alternative schools improve self-esteem and virtually eliminate discipline problems. The absence of physical violence and vandalism in alternative schools is even more remarkable when one recalls that the students being served are frequently among the hard-core offenders (Strathe and Hash, 1979; Duke and Perry, 1978; Barr, 1981).

Improved attitude and behavior is notable in the operation of the schools. Observations of alternative classes in Portland "found every student engaged in constructive activity nearly 100 percent of the time," a notable gain over Goodlad's observations of just over 75 percent of class time spent in constructive activity in an average high school classroom. Other observers report that alternative schools are relaxed and friendly, yet productive and serious. Raywid concludes that "Student attitudes toward school are widely reported to change for the better in alternative schools, and the attitudes of parents toward these schools is consistently reported as unusually positive." Post-graduation surveys find continued high regard for alternative school education (Yagi, p. 22; Goodlad, 1984; Raywid, 1984, p. 74; Malmberg, 1983).

Elements of Successful Schools

Size

There is general agreement concerning the sources of the success of alternative school-based dropout prevention programs. Virtually all the literature cites size as a crucial element. Class size is small, allowing individualization of instruction and close relationships between teachers and students. School size -- the number of students and teachers -- is also small, reducing the bureaucratization and impersonality most urban and consolidated high schools, and facilitating closer relationships between a student and his peers, the faculty, and the activities of the institution.

Choice

The element of choice figures prominently as well. In the majority of these programs, both teachers and students have opted for the program. This is apparently as true in dropout prevention programs as in other alternative school settings. One researcher estimates that nearly 80 percent of all alternative schools, including dropout prevention schools, have genuine choice. This in itself seems to create special commitments to the program on the part of both groups (Raywid, 1982).

Autonomy

Successful schools also are notably autonomous. Their staff feel empowered to create cohesive programs with clear, well-defined goals and to have ownership of the programs. Ownership and empowerment add to commitment and responsiveness to students, many of whom, as indicated earlier, are hungry for responsiveness and attention, and who respond in kind. The result is frequent

student reports of caring teachers and a learning environment which is demanding but supportive.

Small, autonomous institutions with which one affiliates by choice rather than coercion fosters a positive school climate and cohesiveness. They also facilitate the creation of structures that allow and encourage student participation in the crucial work of the institution, and altered roles for staff. The role diversification for both students and staff add to their commitment, involvement, and sense of ownership and affiliation. The estrangement, marginalization, and disenchantment that at-risk students exhibit toward conventional schooling is reduced in proportion to the degree to which the alternative school creates the possibilities for participation and affiliation. The difference in climate or ethos between traditional schools and alternative schools is the difference between formally constituted groups, whose bonds are regulations, and communities, whose bonds are shared commitments, affection and mutuality.

Varied Learning Opportunities

Finally, small class size and low student loads allow for maximum use of experiential learning, learning by doing, of individualized, self-paced learning, and of small-group learning. The element of choice carries over into teacher and student choice of curriculum and instructional mode. In existing dropout prevention programs, one finds enhanced opportunities for student achievement -- partial course credit, fast-paced cycles, learning contracts. Classroom vitality is maintained through small classes devoted to dialogue and learning through doing.

Summary of Essential Elements

Rather than the educational anarchy that accompanies the popular conception of alternative education, the consistent message in the extant literature is that alternative schools today are highly structured. The structure does not arise from bureaucratic order, clearly, but rather from the seriousness of purpose communicated by dedicated teachers, by the sense of common effort engendered by the fact of choice and the positive learning climate, and by few simple rules, clearly stated and fairly enforced.

Raywid summarized the crucial elements of successful alternative schools thus:

1. The alternative schools or units (e.g., schools-within-schools) are small in size.
2. They represent cohesive programs with clear, well-defined aims and values to which all staff are committed.
3. All associated with the school are there by choice, both students and staff.
4. There is an emphasis on school climate and cohesiveness, a deliberate self-consciousness that heightens feelings of affiliation.
5. There are options and choices within the alternative or magnet which facilitate continuing responsiveness to student needs and interests; e.g., choice with respect to curriculum and instructional activities.
6. Instructional activities prominently include experiential learning projects and opportunities.
7. The optional program is permitted to depart from standard practice of the parent school, or the district, in designing, carrying out, and modifying its program. This means it has a fair measure of autonomy.

She goes on to argue that alternative schools "lacking any one of the above features have reduced chances for success. . . ." (Raywid, 1985, p. 4)

There is, of course, much more involved in creating a successful school than its internal dynamics. A prior requirement is administrative and community commitment. The Director of New York State Education Department's Division of School Registration and Supervision listed four elements needed at the administrative level to assure a successful alternative program:

* The board of education provides strong support through funding and program approval.
* Where alternative education programs operate within a regular high school or in an off-site annex, the leadership and support of the principal, while alone not assuring success, are necessary elements in successful programs. Conversely, lack of leadership and support tend to produce failure in terms of staff efficiency, student self-esteem, and the extent to which objectives are achieved. The proactive visibility of the principal must not disappear once the program is launched, but must be continuous and obvious.
* Superintendents of schools bear similar obligations for free-standing programs. Especially, there needs to be solid, voiced support for the different management styles in successful alternative programs. Participation by students and faculty in the planning and operation of the program should not be simply tolerated, but be expected and applauded.
* Whether an alternative program is free-standing or an entity of regular schools, the superintendent ought to take every opportunity to inform the school and general community of the accomplishments of the program. (Weiner, 1985, p.9)

Costs

Because the per-pupil cost of schooling varies so greatly from place to place, and because the specifications of alternative schools differ so greatly, it is difficult to provide a

precise sense of the cost of alternative school dropout programs. This brief discussion can only indicate some of the impressions gained from the literature.

Although the majority of programs report student/teacher ratios of fewer than 18 to 1, and fully a quarter claim fewer than 12 to 1, 62 percent reported per-pupil costs equal to or less than the average cost in the host district. ALP: Alternative Learning Project in Providence, Rhode Island, cost $1,100 per student, compared with $1,800 per student in regular Providence schools in 1979. Yet the Norwich, New York alternative school was having funding problems in 1985, having been initiated by a grant from the Private Industry Council as part of its federal job training grant program. Its actual comparative costs are unclear. Schools using the new alternative high school in Cortland, New York, pay $2,600 per student. The program received a $50,000 start-up grant from the state, and hopes to receive $40,000 for its second year. Not unexpectedly, programs with vocational training components tend to be more costly than the district average.

There are a number of factors that help to explain the lower costs of some programs. Many alternative schools borrow space from colleges, businesses, or other sources, thereby saving utility and custodial costs. Some rely on community libraries or other schools' libraries. Extracurricular costs are lower. Many lack a cafeteria. They seldom require security personnel. And they generally get along without much of the expensive equipment

-- labs, computers, physical education apparatus, and so forth -- that are taken for granted in traditional schools (Kenyon, 1979; Raywid, 1982; Preuss, 1985; Lytle, 1980).

Balanced against the immediate cost to the district is the less tangible, but no less real, future cost of school dropouts to the community. Many estimates that have been made of those costs are of dubious value, based on unverifiable assumptions. But that should not blind us to the reality of the burden borne by individuals and by the community when young people find it too painful to remain in a traditional classroom, particularly if, as several theorists have argued, traditional classes are "rigged" to assure the failure of a portion of every generation (Morley and Clay, 1983; Carnoy, 1974; Bowles and Gintis, 1976).

Conclusion

Most alternative schools are in urban and suburban areas. Raywid estimates that not quite ten percent are in rural districts, and there is no indication of how many of those are dropout prevention programs. Nonetheless, there are viable programs now operating in smaller cities and rural areas, some, such as Sault Alternative High School, dealing with social problems more intractable than those facing dropouts in upstate New York. The evidence available suggests overwhelmingly that dropout prevention programs housed in alternative schools are successful with a large majority of their clients. It must be

pointed out, however, that none of the extant literature sought to locate failed dropout programs. Thus contrary evidence, if it exists, is not available. On the other hand, Raywid points out that all of the failed alternative schools enumerated in a Florida study fell well short of the seven factors she finds necessary for success (see above, pp. 15-16).

Arguably, then, on grounds of national experiences with alternative school-based dropout programs, probable success in replication, probable impact on target population, and educational value, such programs are a worthy investment. It appears that three factors remain for local districts to determine: What will a program cost, and can they afford it? Do they have committed, experienced staff capable of taking on the task? And can they convince the public of its value?

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